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Power Grab Rerun

Media pundits, with their usual flair for simplification, termed Gerald Ford's demands for a significant role in a Reagan administration as "co-presidency." The Republican deal-makers, striving to find a less inflammatory phrase to make their "dream ticket" palatable to the electorate, described it as a "restructuring of the vice presidency." The word "restructuring" rang an alarm bell in my memory. When I learned that Henry Kissinger was involved in the negotiations, I remembered where I'd heard about "restructuring" before.

It was the innocent-sounding concept that Kissinger had used early in Richard Nixon's first administration—on its very first day, in fact—to justify his seizure of foreign-policy authority from the traditional custodian of America's dealings with other nations, the secretary of state.

Kissinger was Ford's chief negotiator in the backroom dealings that would have given the former president unprecedented power in a Reagan admin-

istration. Indeed, his insistence on arrogating a lion's share of presidential authority to his former boss is credited with the breakdown in the negotiations, and the ultimate decision by Reagan to go with George Bush as a more compliant running mate.

Whether the Reagan negotiators were aware of Kissinger's role in a previous "restructuring" of executive power, I don't know. But classified documents I've seen show they were wise to be suspicious of Kissinger's attempt to give Ford—and, thereby, Kissinger himself, as Ford's adviser—powers that no vice president in history has ever had.

Kissinger's past performance in power-grabbing began on Jan. 20, 1969—Nixon's first Inauguration Day. While the new chief executive was smiling and waving to the units in the inaugural parade, Kissinger was busy drafting secret memos for Nixon's signature.

The memos—called "National Security Decision Memorandums No. 1 and No. 2"—undercut Nixon's gentle-

manly choice for secretary of state, William Rogers, and gave effective control of U.S. foreign policy to Kissinger as "assistant to the president for national security affairs."

NSDM No. 1 established the memorandum process as a bureaucratic mechanism. NSDM No. 2 spelled out the "restructuring" of the National Security Council, which had until then been an important but not overriding advisory tool of American presidents, subservient to the State Department in the conduct of foreign affairs.

The first two National Security Decision Memorandums, both dated Jan. 20, 1969, changed all that.

"The National Security Council shall be the principal forum for consideration of policy issues requiring presidential determination," NSDM No. 2 stated in no-nonsense fashion. "The nature of the issues to be considered may range from current crises and immediate operational problems to middle- and long-range planning."

Clearly, this didn't leave much for the secretary of state to oversee. Lest anyone be in doubt about where the clout resided, however, the memo, signed by the obliging Nixon, laid it on the line: "The Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs at my direction and in consultation with the Secretaries of State and Defense shall be responsible for determining the Agenda and ensuring that the necessary papers are prepared."

In other words, Kissinger would control what issues would be deemed important enough for Nixon's personal attention. He would be the channel through which the president would learn what the State Department and the Pentagon were thinking.

Subsequent NSDMs completed the restructuring of the U.S. foreign policy apparatus. No. 4, for example, gave Kissinger authority for long-range policy development in various regions and even in specific countries: "The Assistant to the President for National

Security Affairs will direct the preparation of a five-year program memorandum to serve as a basis for Agency planning in the country or region concerned."

Having kidnapped foreign policy from the secretary of state, Kissinger wasn't about to relinquish his power when he became secretary of state for largely public relations reasons in Nixon's embattled second term. So he kept both jobs. And when he finally gave up his national security role under Ford, he saw to it that an unambitious administrator, Gen. Brent Scowcroft, succeeded him at the National Security Council.

With this history, it's no wonder that Kissinger was willing to rewrite the Constitution on the 69th floor of the Detroit Plaza Hotel to further his own ambition. The real wonder is that Reagan, unlike Nixon and Ford, was able to resist the arrogant posturing of the former Harvard professor.

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